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ABSTRACT

The importance of incorporating aural comprehension activities in the second language classroom is discussed. In addition, both the theoretical models upon which the listening comprehension research is based and the operational definitions employed by the researchers are examined. It is suggested that research demonstrates the value of emphasizing listening comprehension activities in the beginning stages of second language acquisition. To emphasize aural comprehension activities, research studies suggest that teachers may wish to: (1) use advance organizers, (2) have students create mental images, (3) use graphics to allow students to demonstrate comprehension, (4) use gestures or mime to evaluate and facilitate global comprehension, (5) vary speech rate and passage structure to teach comprehension ability, (6) develop increased memory span in students to aid their comprehension, and (7) provide instruction through the devleopment of sequential learning activities. It is claimed that the development of these skills can help students become more accurate predictors of what they will hear. This predictive ability allows the listeners to process an item more rapidly and with less effort by allowing the separation of the essential from the nonessential elements in a message. Three reasons why second language learning require development of this predictive ability are cited. (SW)

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Aural Comprehension in the Second Language Classroom

ED233569

Wayne Moss

Research studies, particularly those from the last two decades, have demonstrated the importance of the initial development of aural skills and their transfer to development in the other three skill areas: reading, speaking, and writing (5, 15, 23). In addition, there is empirical evidence that an emphasis on oral production actually inhibits second language acquisition (10, 19, 27). Despite this evidence, the audio-lingual approach is still the most prevalent method followed in today's second language classes (with the lingual component receiving the most emphasis).

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Recent curriculum guides for both first and second language programs (1, 2, 3, 31) reflect research findings in their emphasis on instructional activities intended to develop auditory comprehension skills. The fact that these skills can be taught (8, 10, 16), though recognized in the curricular documents, is not reflected in the vast majority of textbooks used to teach these new programs. The dilemma facing classroom teachers is how to meet the aural objectives of new programs without the benefit of appropriate support materials. Teachers must first accept the importance of including aural comprehension activities in their classes, and secondly, must familiarize themselves with the kinds of activities that have been shown to foster improvement in aural comprehension skills.

What is Listening Comprehension?

In order to provide a frame of reference from which to review the research findings on listening comprehension, it is necessary to examine both the theoretical models upon which the research is based and the operational definitions employed by the researchers. Judith Gary (15:70) provides the most succinct definition of listening comprehension. She differentiates it from hearing and refers to it as "a process whereby the student is actively attempting to understand and respond effectively to oral communication carefully presented in a meaningful context."

Two models of this process provided by Rivers (29) and by Gary (15, 16), though using different terminology, see listening and reading as receiver skills and speaking and writing as producer skills (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). An additional model which describes the listening process itself is provided by Ruddell (in 28) and Friedman (13). Both see the subprocesses involved in listening as part of a continuum. Whereas Ruddell looks at the content of the message for his terms (factual - interpretive - applicative), Friedman concentrates on the response of the listener (attending - understanding - evaluating). These models provide a framework by which it is possible to visualize accurately the active processes involved in listening.

Research Findings

Both Asher (5) and Postovsky (27) feel that listening comprehension is the most important, yet the least highly rated of second language acquisition skills. In his article outlining the Total Physical Response Technique (TPRT), Asher recommends that "for at least one semester in college or six months to a year in high school, the goal of foreign language learning should be listening fluency only" (5:4). Postovsky concurs by stating that "training in processing of auditory input (listening comprehension) in the initial phase of instruction is more productive than training in generation of speech output" (27:21). The concensus of these and many other researchers is not to suppress oral production in favor of aural comprehension, but to emphasize the latter while allowing students to speak rather than *forcing* them to speak (32). This shift in emphasis should see accompanying improvement in all language skill areas (6, 26, 32).

In Asher's second test of TPRT (6), students were given about ten hours of training in listening comprehension before those who felt ready to were given the opportunity to speak.

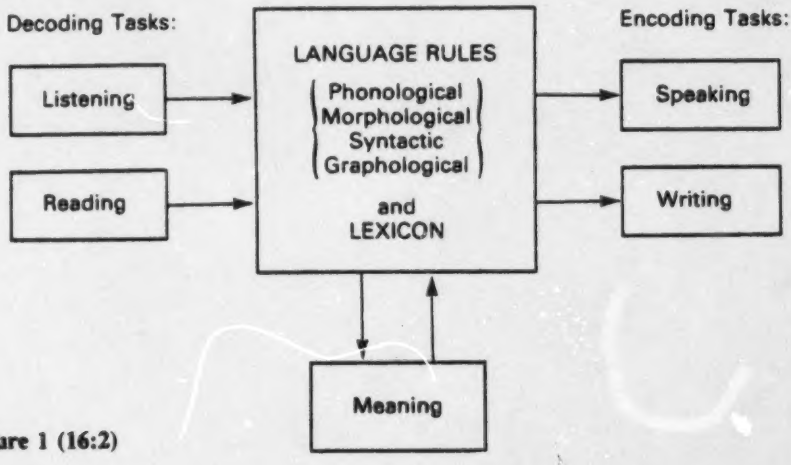
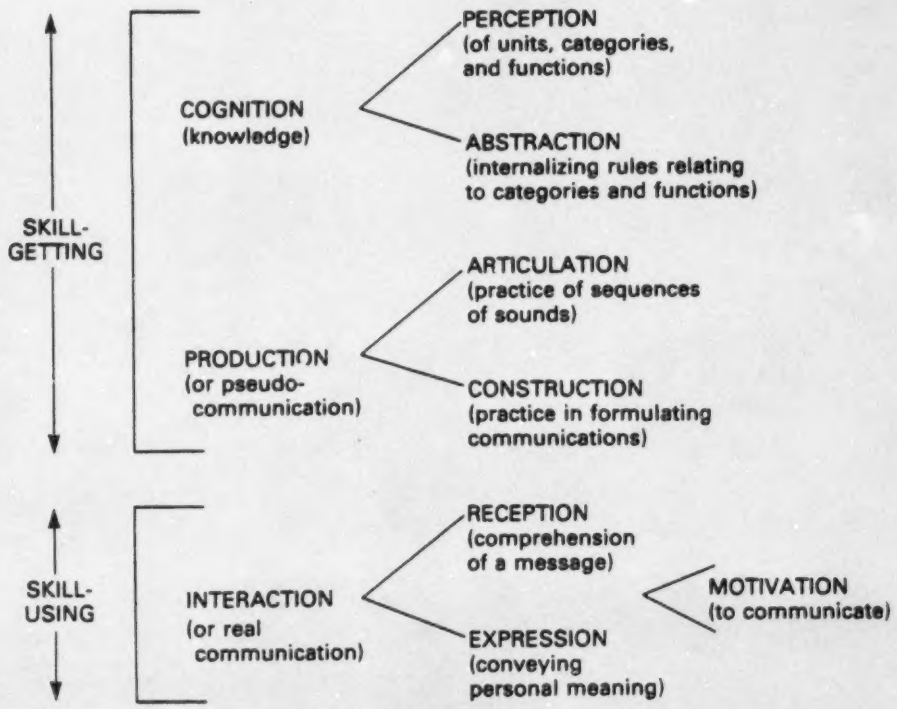


Figure 1 (16:2)

Figure 2 (29:4)

Processes involved in learning to communicate



From then on, approximately twenty per cent of class time was devoted to having the students give instructions to their peers which then had to be acted out. To evaluate the success of this method, the students were given the Pimsleur Spanish Proficiency Test-Form C after ninety hours of training. This test is normally written after 150 hours of training. The experimental group in Asher's study performed beyond the 50th percentile rank for all four skills. With almost no direct instruction in the productive skills, the experimental group mean was beyond the 75th percentile for Level I Spanish and beyond the 65th percentile for Level II Spanish. This performance is significant when one takes into account the fact that these students received less than one-half the normal instructional hours.

In Postovsky's experiment (26), the experimental group gave written rather than oral responses for the first four weeks of a twelve-week intensive language instruction course. They received instruction in the writing system from the very first day of the course, and were given dictation practice rather than oral imitation drills. Students were also asked to write their pattern-drill responses rather than say them. All other conditions (instructors, course content, instructional time, etc.) were identical for both the experimental and the control group. This study showed that the experimental group was superior to the control group in all four skill areas in tests administered after six weeks and after twelve weeks. Skills that had been de-emphasized in each group tended to level out when, after the four-week experimental phase, instruction became more balanced. On the test administered after six weeks, the experimental group, in which the listening comprehension skill had been emphasized, outperformed the control group in seven criterion measures of the speaking skill. The difference between groups on these criterion measures was found to be significant at the .0001 level of confidence.

In the Winitz and Reed (32) method, students are asked, in the target language, to choose one of four pictures presented to them on a viewing screen. The student progresses step by step through numerous groups of pictures until he has learned the base structures and function words of the second language (about 3,000 items). The semantic elements to which the student is exposed become increasingly complex but never exceed more than eight words in length until the base structures are understood. This latter constraint is related to the findings from human memory research (18).

The work of these researchers and others demonstrates the importance of emphasizing listening comprehension activities in

the beginning stages of second language acquisition. Researchers have provided evidence that this strategy is more successful in fostering development in all four skill areas than is an emphasis on oral production. What is more, it has been shown that development in all four skill areas can occur over a shorter period of time.

Aural Comprehension Activities

Examination of existing textual and most teacher-prepared materials which purport to provide instruction in aural comprehension reveals that "we may be demanding more of our foreign-language listeners in the exercises we present than is demanded in native language listening" (29:63). This situation exists because often speech is recorded from a prepared script and therefore contains none of the hesitations and repetitions of normal conversation. In addition, the non-verbal contextual clues from which up to seventy percent of meaning is derived are often absent.

Research studies provide numerous suggestions to enable the classroom teacher to bring about the new emphasis on aural comprehension activities:

1) using advance organizers (7, 22).

2) having students create mental images (14).

3) using graphics to allow students to demonstrate comprehension (15, 16).

4) using gestures or mime to evaluate and facilitate global comprehension (5, 6, 11, 15, 16, 19).

5) varying speech rate and passage structure to teach comprehension ability (9, 28).

6) developing increased memory span in students to aid their comprehension (18, 25).

7) providing instruction through the development of sequential learning activities (20).

Mueller (22) used black-line visuals and Beatty (7) extrinsic motivators to determine their effect on aural comprehension. In both cases, significant relationships were discovered. Simply

showing students a related visual on the overhead projector prior to their hearing an oral passage was sufficient to improve the students' ability to comprehend what they had heard. Beatty found that if students were provided with a strong incentive to understand - in this case extra university credits - their comprehensive ability improved significantly. It would seem advantageous, then, for teachers to use prepared tapes with accompanying visuals or to base listening exercises on available visuals. If an incentive measure can be added, the likelihood of skill development occurring will be even greater.

Another kind of visual is the mental image. The use of this "visual" is effective since second language students are generally academically above average and Gambrell (14) found this technique to be most suitable for this type of student. Prior to listening to an oral passage, students were instructed to create a mental picture of what they would hear, based on their previous knowledge of the content words. For those students able to perform this task, comprehension was easier as was demonstrated by their ease of recall, by their correct ordering of events, and by their success on a written evaluation. At the more advanced levels of second language instruction where longer oral passages are utilized, this strategy could prove to be a useful one.

Another use of images is described by Judith and Norman Gary (15, 16) and by Suzanne Majhanovich (20). Black-line drawings and/or multiple-choice responses are used to allow students to demonstrate comprehension of an oral passage. In these activities, students are expected to choose the picture/answer that best represents the oral passage they hear. A single drawing can be the focus of both affirmative and negative statements as well as a variety of content questions. Relatively few drawings are required to permit concentration on new vocabulary items.

A further non-verbal response suggested by Gary (15, 16) and supported by Asher (5, 6), Postovsky (26), and the Centre International Audio-Visual d'Etudes et de Recherches (11) involves the student's use of gestures or mime to show comprehension. In response to an oral passage, usually a command, the student is called upon to perform the appropriate task. Correct performance is an indicator of comprehension as well as a reinforcement for other students. This technique has proven effective for both child and adult students.

At the Centre International Audio-Viduel d'Etudes et de Recherches (C.I.A.V.E.R.) in St. Ghislain, Belgium, mime is used as an initial test of global comprehension of a multiple-element

dialogue. After hearing the dialogue twice, students are asked to act out the sentences without vocalizing. Only at later stages of the lesson is oral production encouraged. Even this limited delay proved very effective in enhancing the rapid development of all four language skills (11).

This taking advantage of the human inclination to include physical responses as part of communication (24) is one example of a change in learning theory that evolved from direct observation of students. A further suggestion for facilitating the development of listening comprehension skills stems from observations of how adults speak to children. A number of studies are cited in Bonvillian (9) and supported by Riding (28). These studies indicate that when speaking to children, adults have a natural tendency to modify not only the passage length, but also their speech rate and their intonation patterns. These modifications are made to ensure comprehension and are constantly modified as the adult speaker reacts to the non-verbal comprehension cues given by the young listener. Both studies give statistical evidence of the rationale for these modifications: Comprehension in children is enhanced if the speech rate is slower, the intonation pattern is emphasized, and the passage length is kept within the memory span of the listener.

Researchers, particularly Lado (18), have attempted to determine the importance of the memory span variable on second language acquisition. This research shows that the ability to remember oral passages is shorter in a second language than in the first language but that this ability can be strengthened through training. It also improves in direct proportion to the mastery of the second language. The concepts of rate, intonation pattern and memory span are important ones for teachers and authors to remember as they plan the oral comprehension passages to be included in their programs.

Majhanovich (20) has described a series of sequenced listening activities that take these factors into account. Beginning with sound discrimination and continuing through intonation and grammatical clues to global comprehension, she outlines an entire range of practical activities. Each activity builds on skills acquired in previous activities and thereby fosters the development of increased aural comprehension skills. Further examples of practical listening activities can be found in Hendrickson (17).

The development of these skills can help the student become a more accurate predictor of what he will hear. This predictive ability allows the listener to process an item more rapidly and

with less effort by allowing the separation of the essential from the non-essential elements in a message. Second language learners require development of this ability since they are disadvantaged by:

1) their limited knowledge of the cultural context and of the language itself;

2) their lack of those deductive skills required to reconstruct a whole message from bits and pieces;

3) a natural tendency to react to the second language as they would to their first language (12).

All of these factors contribute to the limiting of the memory span of the student, and all of them must be influenced if that span is to be increased.

From the research studies cited in this paper and from the numerous others beyond the scope of this discussion, the truth of Gary's statement (16:7) is obvious: "there is probably more empirical support for the notion of delayed oral practice and intensive listening comprehension in early language teaching than for any other methodological issue which has been investigated."

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